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IMAGES AND METAPHORS OF POWER IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION OF BELARUSIAN AND BRITISH AUTHORS

Abstract. Starting from the second half of the 20th century critics have extensively written about a pronounced historical turn in contemporary fiction. At the beginning 21st century the focus on historical themes has become one of the predominant trends in world literature. The article aims to identify universal elements in the understanding and representation of state power and social hierarchy in the historical fiction by Belarusian and British writers of the late XX – early XXI centuries (L. Daineko, O. Ipatova, L. Rublevskaya, S. Balakhonov, A. Navarich, K. Tarasov, H. Mantel, J. Crace, B. Unsworth and others). The problem of power, along with the problem of identity and trauma, is one of the central issues in contemporary fictional representations of the past. The authors actively turn to the ancient metaphors of theatre and board games (images of chess figures, puppetry, playing Go). On closer examination, the gender distribution of hierarchical powers between characters contradicts the prevailing stereotypes about the difference between female and male prose. At the same time, the attention of writers shifts from the external political aspect to the influence of power on the personality of a leader, actualizing the idea that it is a strong leader, and not circumstances, people or natural determinism that are the driving force of the historical process.

Keywords: historical fiction, contemporary literature, metaphor, power, theatre, hierarchy, stereotype

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ОБРАЗЫ И МЕТАФОРЫ ВЛАСТИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПРОЗЕ БЕЛАРУСИ И БРИТАНИИ

Аннотация. Начиная с 1960-х гг. обращенность к историческим темам стала одной из преобладающих тенденций в мировой литературе. Статья посвящена выявлению универсальных элементов в понимании и репрезентации темы власти и общественной иерархии в прозе белорусских и британских писателей конца XX – начала XXI века (Л. Дайнеко, О. Ипатовой, Л Рублевской, С. Балахонова, А. Наварича, К. Тарасова, Х. Мантел, Дж. Крейса, Б. Ансуорта и др.). Проблема власти наряду с проблемой идентичности и травмы является одной из центральных в современных художественных репрезентациях прошлого. При ее разработке авторы активно обращаются к древним метафорам театра и игры (образы шахмат, марионеток, батлейки, игры в го). При ближайшем рассмотрении гендерное распределение иерархических полномочий между героями противоречит сложившимся стереотипам о различии женской и мужской прозы. При этом внимание писателей смещается с внешнего политического аспекта к влиянию власти на личность, психику персонажей, актуализируя идею о том, что именно конкретная персона, а не обстоятельства, народ или природная детерминированность являются движущей силой исторического процесса.

Ключевые слова: историческая проза, современная литература, метафора, власть, иерархия, игра, стереотип

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Starting from the 60s–70s of the twentieth century exploration of history started to permeate European and American literatures, and the fact that several of the most important novels of the era focused on the complexities of understanding and representing the past, marked the revival of historical fiction at the end of the 20th century.

In Belarus, historical mysteries and parables by V. Korotkevich (*"The Wild Hunt of King Stakh"*, 1964; *"The Dark Castle Olshansky", "Christ landed in Harodnya"*) become a nationwide phenomenon, and their impact on the genre of the historical novel is predominant even at the beginning of the 21st century. At the end of the 70s a turn to national past marks the works by L. Daineko (the first Belarusian historical fiction cycles *"People and Lightnings"*, 1978; *"The Sword of Prince Vyachka"*, 1987; *"Werewolf's Trail"* etc.). At the same time V. Orlov starts publishing his essays about ancient Polotsk, O. Ipatova writes fictionalised accounts of lives of prominent women: *"Pradslava"* (1971), *"The Black Princess"* (1989).

In Europe three books – Fowles' *"The French Lieutenant's Woman"* (1969), U. Eco's *"The Name of the Rose"* (1981) and S. Rushdie's *"Midnight's Children"* (1980) marked the beginning of a new Renaissance of the historical novel, a genre that had been deemed an unviable relic of the past: *"That recent British and anglophone fiction has taken a historical turn has become an axiom of critical commentary on the contemporary British literary scene"* [1, p. 167].

A distinctive feature of the Belarusian literary process is that in it, history-centred works have always occupied a special place due to their ability to create and disseminate the idea of a unifying common past, which is especially relevant for a country that has fought long and hard for independence and through this struggle has lost the majority of its material cultural artefacts. Numerous attempts have been made to erase or substitute Belarusian identity, claiming it to be a variant of a Polish or Russian cultural space, so that in many cases ideas, legends, myths and bits of witness testimony were the only indestructible thing left. The constant appeal to familial bonds, roots and regional belonging, thus, distinguishes a large number of significant literary texts by Belarusian authors, even if the texts themselves cannot be attributed to the genre of historical fiction in the strict sense of the word. Allusions to the ideas of cultural memory, images of notable personalities become the basis not only of the conventional plots about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the uprisings of the 19th century or the vicissitudes of the Soviet period, but also inspire dystopian visions of the future starting with *"A Person with the Diamond Heart"* by L. Daineko (1994) to *specifically postmodern, experimental works by S. Balakhonov*, M. Martysevich (*"Sarmatia"*, Book of the Year Award, 2018), M. Andrasyuk (*"Full moon"*, 2018). The analysis of the dynamics of social development through many generations of one family, the desire to create a veritable archive of national memory from fragments of personal recollections are distinctive features of the novels by V. Gnilomedov, G. Dalidovich, N. Yakovenko, A. Arkush and V. Orlov.

There are currently an infinite number of ways and models of historical representation within the framework of a literary text, from more conventional works that preserve the tradition of the classic novel to semi- or pseudo-documentary fiction, family sagas, experimental prose that incorporate elements of magical realism, pastiche, metafiction and other techniques favoured by postmodern writers. Despite the existing diversity of literary forms, it is possible to discern a certain invariable problem field, the core of which is made up of three major topics: issues of identity (personal, national), depiction of cultural trauma, and the problem of social hierarchy.

A significant part of the texts aimed at exploring the defining role of the past for understanding the current state of society is focused on the issues of leadership, the figures of rulers and people who, in one way or another, defined their epoch. At the same time, this side of the genre has attracted very little attention of researchers; from the available works, it is possible to name the dissertation *"The Concept of National Existence in the Fiction of Belarusian Immigrant Writers of the 20th century"* by A. Pashkevich (Belatusian State University, 2002), "Power and Punishment in Scott's Novels" by Bruce Beiderwell (University of Georgia Press, 1992) and some articles by D. Aristov, I. Domorad, K. Grady and J. Shulevitz.

The aim of the study, therefore, is to identify invariants in the literary representation of the motive of power in history-centred works of contemporary British and Belarusian authors in a comparative aspect. To achieve this it is necessary to consider the principal metaphors and symbols that embody authors' perception of the idea of state power and personal leadership; to analyse literary gender stereotypes of hierarchical relationships; and, finally, to single out the ontological aspect of the topic in contemporary historical fiction.

The study of the nature of power and its influence both on the personality of the bearers and the course of social development is one of the fundamental motives of historical fiction. L. Daineko, V. Charopko, V. Korotkevich believed that it is the personality of a leader, not some generic idea of a people or socioeconomic conditions that determines the fate of the nation. The Swedish history professor and romantic poet E.G. Geijer in his often-quoted statement argued, that the history of the Swedish people is the history of its kings: "*Svenska folkets historia <...> är dess konungars*", and S. Brantly specifies: *"the history of the Swedish people is the history of its attitude towards Charles XII"* [2, p. 524; 3, p. 164].

The avid supporter of such theory is, for example, the British writer H. Mantel, whose historical books focus precisely on the exceptional figures of the leaders of the French Revolution (*"A Place of Greater Safety"*, 1992), or the reformers and enlighteners of the Tudor period (the Thomas Cromwell trilogy, 1999–2021).

The essence of social relations is described most fully through the metaphors of a (board) game and playacting (political theatre), which in their turn have a very long literary history. Traditionally such analogies convey the idea of a rigid worldly hierarchy with strictly assigned, predetermined roles (often reinterpreted as an idea of an inescapable fate that is impossible to change or avoid). "Endless puppetry", where "everyone is dancing on a separate stick" and no one is free, that is how the realities of a vicious cycle of Belarusian history are described by L. Rublevskaya, Y. Senkevich and S. Balakhonov: *"Батлейка без канца. П. А <...> сам у ігрышчы гэным – на кіёчку. Як і астальныя лялькі"* [4, p. 132].

We come across numerous depictions of characters' semblance to chess pieces or figurines from a mechanical music box, which signifies their lack of agency. This is a situation against which they either rebel and win or accept and perish, losing their will and personality. Moreover, in the works of Belarusian authors, the metaphor of playacting turns out to be so ubiquitous, that referring to life as a game is employed randomly, even when such analogies are not fully justified by the plot. They serve as an exaggerated reminder of the absurdity and unpredictability of the state system, in which each of them is a disposable element. Examples can be found in the historical mysteries of M. Klimkovich, M. Adamchik, A. Globus (collection of stories and novellas *"The Crown of Vitaŭt the Great"*), whose characters perceive human relationships exclusively as role-playing. Consequently, in the story, they themselves are often given professions of directors, actors and similar creative positions. These obsession with motives of incessant playacting is inherited by the current generation of authors. For example, the novel *"The King's Triangle"* by E. Asnorevsky (2018) deals with an exceptionally sensitive issue of preservation of historical city architecture by employing grotesque references to chess moves and Indiana Jones-style guessing games. The characters are presented alternatively like surreal comic book super heroes, avatars of famous people from the past or chess figures whose destiny is being written by an invisible puppet-master: *"Вы гуляеце ў гульню, а я буду вас накіроўваць"; "Так, гэта ўсё выглядае нейкім коміксам. Я іх люблю, але самому быць героем коміксу, усё-ткі вельмі дзіўна"* [5].

We see exactly the same idea, although much more subtly conveyed, in the novel "*The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*" by D. Mitchell, where political machinations are likened to a game of Go, which gradually and insidiously subjugates its initiators. Those who consider themselves masters of the situation, have long lost control over their own intrigues, which continue to develop against their will: *"Do you ever suspect … we don't play Go, rather Go plays us?"* [6, p. 521].

The idea of playing with the fates of dependant people by princes and magnates is a leitmotif of historical fiction by V. Orlov. In his short story *"The Mercy of Prince Hieronym"* we witness the subversion of one of the primary Christian virtues. The prince easily concurs with the plea to pardon the rebels if the protagonist (who acts as a petitioner for leniency) agrees to be executed in their stead:

“Задумаўся князь на хвіліну <...> – Добра, гарматнік, – гаворыць, – калі ўжо ў цябе душа такая далікатная, можаш не восем, а дзевяць сваіх баламутаў ратаваць. Скеміў? Гэты дзявяты на тваё месца стане, а ты – на ягонае” [7, p. 80].

The same ease in resolving the issues of someone else’s life and death on the part of those in power is consistently shown in *the “Prantish Vyrvich”* cycle by L. Rublevskaya. Despite all his talent and medical knowledge, the protagonist is seen only as a useful tool even by those magnates who pose as his patrons and benefactors. There is a memorable scene when aristocrats engage in playing “the game of ‘set the doctor free’” and the matter of life and death is turned into a farce and a bit of entertainment: *“Паны рагаталі, нібыта глядзелі ў балагане на дрэсіраваных мядзведзяў, якіх прымушаюць танчыць, выяўляць з сябе свецкіх хлюстаў у багатых касцюмах”* [8, p. 143].

Throughout the cycle, the heroes rebel against their “instrumental” function, trying to stop being just a means of realising somebody else’s goals and ambitions. Prantysh and Lednik are not perceived as equals by the nobility (despite the fact that Prantish belongs to the szlachta), and duke Baginsky supports the protagonists just to spite his sister: *“Пранцысь моўчкі глядзеў, як Лёднік і Саламея Рэніч на каленях дзякуюць дабрадзеям за гэткую высокую міласць. Кланяюцца, стараюцца <...> А паны ўсё рагочуць <...> Рогат нібыта ператвараўся ў перліны, якія затаплялі пакой, як у колісь убачаным жахлівым сне”* [8, p. 144].

Deep distrust of state power and the effectiveness of its institutions in general seems to be a universal feature of the analysed texts. It can be promptly expressed by the characteristic *“bald-pated pantaloons”, “British boobies”* given to the governing bodies by the characters of P. O’Brian or the popular moniker of the king *“Your Moronship”* in *“A Place of Greater Safety”* by H. Mantel. The prevailing desire to distance themselves from politics and any kind of ruling positions is a stable trait of protagonists in Belarusian texts: *“Зашыцца ў які лес, зямлянку выкапаць і жыць у ёй, пакуль не скончыцца ўсё”* [9, с. 257]. Therefore, the protagonists are persistently advised not to attract the attention of the king as a necessary condition to survive and navigate the intricacies of social life: *“We’re all worms, we’re all shit. Do you realize that you could be locked up tomorrow, for the rest of your natural life, if the King put his name to a piece of paper that he’s never even read?”* [10, p. 8].

Almost all Belarusian authors of the older generation (K. Tarasov, L. Daineko, O. Ipatova, L. Rublevskaya), J. Meek, and H. Mantel, B. Unsworth, in whose historical works temptations and depravities brought on by power are often one of the central themes (*“The Ruby in Her Navel”, “Morality Play”, “Sacred Hunger*”), return to the same religious idea of inner freedom, which is the only thing that can give the hero independence from the rules and roles, transforming the political theatre into a metaphysical game of good versus evil. It dismantles the idea of fate, takes the characters out of the cycle of history because everything is decided only by the individual choice: *“толькі цяпер, напрыканцы гульні, разумею. – Гульні?! – Прайгранай гульні, – сумна ўдакладніў Дан, – даўно, калі не з самага пачатку, прайгранай. І не абвінаваціш жа ў пройгрышы жыццё, <...> правілы, па якіх мы гуляем хто ў д’ябла, хто ў самога Бога, спадзеючыся выйграць, выбіраем мы самі”* [11, p. 103].

The metaphor of politics as a theatre and characters as masks wearers has not lost its relevance since the days of medieval drama. We see numerous examples of its use to describe the royal court in the *“Wolf Hall Trilogy”* by H. Mantel, where truth is always inferior in strength and significance to the script, concocted by clever words: *“the queen does not expect your friendship, only an outward show”* [12, p. 556]. The arrest of Cardinal Wolsey is described as a well-staged play. The real roles enacted by the cardinal’s adversaries are later (sometimes prophetically) mirrored in the costumes they wear during the performance in the palace: *“devils wrench off their masks, and toss them, swearing, into a corner; he watches as they try to claw off their knitted devil-coats. They turn to each other, laughing, and begin to pull them over each other’s heads. The dead man pulls off his mask. It is Sexton, the fool”* [12, p. 220].

Playacting is an invariable component of a literary portrait of a politician, whose true nature is deliberately obscured by the constant change of personas. B. Unsworth’s protagonist from the novel *“Losing Nelson”* is trying to write a biography of his idol Lord Nelson, but sees only a frightening,

confusing multiplicity of the admiral's faces. An aura of mystery and unpredictability is a universal characteristic of literary portraits of leaders, of both Belarusian and English authors:

Усе павінны баяцца твайго маўчання, твайго смеху, твайго позірку, бо ніхто не павінен угадаць, што за гэтым маўчаннем і смехам – гнеў або міласць, што ў гэтым позірку – прысуд смяротны або ўхвала [13, с. 81].

A man's power is in the half-light, "Cromwell thinks to himself". It is the absence of facts that frightens people: the gap you open, into which they pour their fears, fantasies, desires [12, p. 24].

The deliberate whimsicalness of Prince Mindovg and Vseslav from the novels by L. Daineko, of Hieronym Radziwill from the Vyrvich cycle by L. Rublevskaya, childish tantrums and affected helplessness of King Henry are called to conceal the calculating nature of a true politician: *"The king is a complainer too. He has a headache. The Duke of Suffolk is stupid. The weather is too warm for the time of year. The country is going to the dogs"* [12, p. 227]. All these strategies are emphasized in the first book of the trilogy when the author strives to establish the image of the ruler. The king loves to disarm his opponent with visible friendliness and good-heartedness: *"But,'he says, in the tone of one misunderstood, 'I am a prince known for my munificence"* [12, с. 38]. However, this is a false weakness and feigned simplicity; a game, which by its very existence only emphasizes the inviolability of social boundaries and the inaccessibility of the elites: *"with the king, you can share a joke with him. But as Thomas More used to say, it's like sporting with a tamed lion. You tousle its mane and pull its ears, but all the time you're thinking, those claws, those claws, those claws"* [14, p. 151].

That is why the motive of power is so often shaped via metaphors of light and shadow, mirrors and reflections. In the book *"The Zone of Interest"* by M. Amis (2014), the mythologization of the image of Hitler is achieved through a folkloric technique of name avoidance. In the novels of H. Mantel and B. Unsworth, the characters are afraid of portraits and mirrors, since in them, as in some Dorian-Gray-like magical artefacts, the true face of the character begins to appear through the usual mask. A vivid description of this process is the study of Admiral Nelson's portrait in the novel by B. Unsworth: *"But it was a borrowed face, it was not his <...> Eyes a greenish brown, an expression cold, pitiless, but not as though native to him—it was induced, laid on his face. The cruelty was something he was bleakly resigned to, as he was resigned to his role. Not the travelling player now. This was Horatio in the part of killer"* [15, p. 50].

This same policy of constant pretence, which at the beginning of the story protects the position and authority of the leader, finally turns against him and proves to be destructive for his personality. In this aspect, the theme of power merges with another major problem of modern history centric works, namely, the problem of gaining and preserving one's true identity. Behind the mask the character does not have time to truly get to know himself, which will inevitably lead to death – as we see in the destinies of political figures, princes and magnates, who until the very end believe in their ability to mould and subjugate reality to their will in the novels by H. Mantel, K. Tarasov, L. Daineko, L. Rublevskaya.

L. Daineko, O. Ipatova and P. O'Brian are among the few authors, whose ideas of power are not reduced to criticizing the despotic nature of the state system or the destructive impact of impunity on a human psyche. They emphasize the crushing burden of responsibility that any leading position imposes on the bearer: *"Усіх нас Бог зрабіў роўнымі, мама. І смерд, і князь – усе стаяць на Страшным Судзе аднолькава, нікому няма перавагі. – Але <...> нашто тады мы, князі? Чаму так на гэтым свеце зроблена? Значыць, нам дадзена болей, чым смердам, з нас болей і спытаецца"* [16, p. 25].

These writers' concept of the political theatre is not that of weak-willed pawns and puppets, but rather the noble farce of Montaigne, whose heroes are equally responsible for their decisions: *"N'est-ce pas une noble farce, de laquelle les Roys, les choses publiques, et les Empereurs, vont joüant leur personnage tant de siecles"* [17, p. 914]. This is a game of a slightly different level and character. A game that does not accentuate the social gap between people, but focuses on the functional conditioning of each role, high and low, while emphasizing their equality before fate.

In other reviewed works, as if highlighting the utopian unattainable nature of the idea of absolute equality and a just society, the authors repeatedly demonstrate an inevitable evolution towards absolutism and despotism of any, even a most enlightened system. H. Mantel, for almost two thousand pages, traces

how King Henry from an energetic enlightened monarch turns into a self-conscious unpredictable despot; how prudent and far-sighted Cromwell is increasingly absorbed by the grandiose ideas of restructuring the society, thus losing the ability to soberly predict the possible consequences of his words and actions. A. Arkush, A. Fedorenko, V. Orlov, L. Rublevskaya, P. Barker in their novels demonstrate how, with the change of historical epochs, the tyranny of a prince or an absolute monarch is replaced by the dehumanising suffocating tyranny of bureaucracy.

Contrary to the stereotypical view that women writers of historical novels prefer to focus on amorous adventures or a private everyday side of events, the issues of power struggle get no less attention from them, than in the works of male novelists, and female characters as a rule are as obsessed with the ideas of hierarchy and control. It's just that their power is of a different kind.

A simplified dichotomy of female characters into hapless victims and mercenary predators is characteristic of a very limited number of authors (L. Daineko, K. Tarasov, L. Rublevskaya).

Belarusian male writers of the older generation are much more prone to sentimentality and reliance on gender stereotypes. The most typical example is the short stories by V. Mazhilovsky, where even a woman murderer is always an involuntary victim of adverse social conditions. The books by Y. Tatarinov (*"Fatal passion of The Grand Duke Mindaugas"*), K. Tarasov (*"The Three Lives of the Princess Rogneda"*) rarely depict a Duchess or a Princess as an active agent but rather a noble martyr or a wellmeaning but ineffective plotter (e. g. comic attempts of Panna Oksana to organise a rebellion in *"The Lithuanian Wolf"* by A. Navarich).

Paradoxically, it is mostly male Belarusian writers of historical fiction that seem to demonstrate the characteristics usually attributed to romance novels: affectation and melodrama, the focus on love life and redeeming female power, idealised images of fair maidens and evil jealous mistresses: images of Zoya in *"Name your son Constantine"* by L. Daineko, fair ladies from "The Dances over the city" by V. Orlov.

L. Daineko prefers to create binary oppositions when one heroine will be the embodiment of typical female virtues (patience, kindness, devotion, protective courage) and, the other will illustrate the worst sides of women's nature: lust for power and riches, envy and cruelty towards younger rivals: *"Кожны дзень Дабранега разам з вернай Купінай рабіла абход церама і ўсяго княжацкага двара. Чэлядзь загадзя падмятала, чысціла, мыла ўсе куточкі вялікага церама. Страх і трапятанне былі ўсюды"* [18, p. 9].

An inversion of gender roles is presented in the novels of L. Rublevskaya, where the male protagonist is written as a classic Gothic heroine: a vulnerable, talented, virtuous but relatively helpless character who is threatened by a higher-ranking (rich, powerful), strong and unprincipled woman (Panna Polonea, Dana the businesswoman, Empress Catherine the Great, etc.). In the course of the story, he is to be saved by a sensitive, courageous and virtuous heroine.

And yet the majority of authors, both English and Belarusian, prefer more complex and multidimensional female characters, who are actively competing for a place in the social hierarchy.

Women of H. Mantel, T. Bondar, O. Ipatova, even classical Penelope and Helen by M. Atwood are as smart, pragmatic, and often ruthless in achieving their goals, as male politicians and warriors of traditional historical novels. Images of Euphrosyne (Predslava) of Polotsk, Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, numerous princesses of old are not in any way concerned about collateral damage while realising their ambitious plans and are far removed from ideals of womanly virtues: *"Прадыславу балюча ўкалола тое, што тут, у лесе, дзяўчына гаварыла з ёй, нібы з раўнёю"* [16, p. 20]. They all demonstrate rare courage and decisiveness along with the ability to bend moral principles, employ their beauty, feign softness and weakness, but in their essence their power is no more beneficial or peaceful than the power of men: *"Яшчэ адну княжую дачку, Звеніславу, князёўну Барысаўну, прывядзе яна ў манастыр – дары яе манастыру будуць непамерна большыя, чым княжыя ахвяраванні: не пасмее князь Барыс даць за дачкою пасаг небагаты"* [19, p. 94].

H. Mantel weaves a physical portrait of Anne Boleyn as a phantasmagorical tapestry of the victims to Anne's desire to become queen. In Cromwell's eyes, the delicate pink-grey tones of her dress transform into the innards of quartered monks, and her neat nails sparkle like sharpened executioner's blade: *"Anne*

was wearing, that day, rose pink and dove grey. The colours should have had a fresh maidenly charm; but all he could think of were stretched innards, umbles and tripes, grey-pink intestines looped out of a living body; he had a second batch of recalcitrant friars to be dispatched to Tyburn, to be slit up and gralloched by the hangman. They were traitors and deserved the death, but it is a death exceeding most in cruelty. he kept his eyes on her fingertips, nails flashing like tiny knives" [14, p. 36].

The key difference between male and female power is the uncanny ability of the latter to delegate violence and penchant for psychological non-physical assault, which is insidious and difficult to prove. It is significant that the role of a ghost (victim) in historical fiction is typically assigned to female characters, which, according to D. Wallace, symbolizes their repressed position in life [20, p. 87]. However, it is they who receive the right to revenge and administer justice. The lost girls of S. St. James or M. Atwood's hanged maidens from *"The Penelopiad"* (2005) are not powerless but fearsome.

The novel *"Fair Helen"* by A. Greig (nominated for the Walter Scott Prize, 2014) contains not only references to the folk ballad of the same name but also alludes to the myth of Helen of Troy. Her choice of a suitor literally determines the life and death of the parties involved. Female characters in the novel, with all their apparent subordination to a husband or father, are far from damsels in distress. Genuine power, unexpectedly for the narrator, is in the hands of wives and mothers: *"He chuckled quietly, his mood changing again. "I wish you luck in getting this past my mother". "Surely it is the heidsman needs convinced". "She leads Dand as one leads a bull by the ring"* [21, p. 111]. A woman does not need to subjugate hundreds of warriors, she just needs to win the heart of their leader: *"You are the head of this family?" I managed. "I am the heart", she said. "And I have my husband's"* [21, p. 113].

This power is invisible and based not on brutal strength, but on the ability to discover and exploit the weaknesses of others. In O. Ipatova's novel *"The Sign of the Great Magister"* it is Duchess Maria who talks The Great Duke into political assassinations and causes another woman's suicide through a masterful game of court gossip: *"ні цяпер, ні раней не хацела ўзгадваць лідская княгіня, што менавіта яна, Марыя, дабілася-ткі колькі гадоў таму ад Ягайлы злашчаснага загаду, згодна з якім запалонены Вітаўт ужо не выйшаў бы з Крэўскага замка жывым!"; "гэта яна, Марыя, першаю прыдумала плётку, што Вітаўт меў Алену за палюбоўніцу, таму і пайшла тая на смерць"* [22, p. 13–14].

In the same way, young and fair duchess Polonea from L. Rublevskaya's historical cycle, without scruples, manipulates the protagonist's infatuation to force him into political machinations, which gains her the name of "la belle dame sans merci", *"Чароўнай Дамы, якая не мае літасці, дзеля якой варта паміраць, але не варта чакаць удзячнасці і спагады"* [8, p. 151]. The people in any system are never a subject, but always a means. Social equality, freedom is nothing but an illusion, even high-ranking individuals are slaves to their position:

"За смерць кожнага дарагога таварыша... суровая плата па законах ваеннага камунізму! Нашая рабоча-сялянская ўлада самая гуманная" [9, p. 214].

"You think the Prince's friend a free man, the Cardinal's secretary uncompromised, the lady's maid entirely devoted? At the time I was two men, the one who had come to help my friends achieve their hearts' desires, and the shadowy other I loosed only at the end of the day" [21, p. 36].

Both Belarusian and English-speaking authors show surprising solidarity in characterizing the dominant features of power relations of different historical eras, as a result of which a set of invariants can be identified in literary representations of social hierarchy.

On the level of style and imagery, the writers prefer to explore the complexities of political processes through age-old metaphors of chess, puppetry and theatrical play, conveying the ideas of class constraints, the unattainability of utopian equality and specifically the dangers of self-estrangement and loss of identity when the mask substitutes the humanity of the bearer. The general conclusion is that actual freedom from the constraints of the political game and inevitable playacting is possible only through the ontological understanding of personal existence, at the basis of which lies humility, i. e. realistic knowledge of oneself. This idea may look trivial, but it has become trivial exactly because it is true and universal. We may pay attention to the abundance and significance of mirrors (and the fear they

instil in characters) in the Wolf Hall Trilogy, in *"Harvest"* by J. Crace, in historical novels by B. Unsworth, L. Rublevskaya, Z. Kaminskaya. The protagonists are constantly invited to face and accept the (often unpleasant) truth about themselves and reject the distortions, unfounded expectations, unwarranted fears or self-aggrandisement imposed by their social or political status, because what determines their essence lies not outside but within. Here we can remember that Cromwell's downfall comes when he loses the view of the boundaries of his own personality, of his standing in relation to the figure of the king, *"estrangement of self"*, how Cromwell himself puts it: *"The mirror presents an alien face, eyes askew, mouth gaping. Lord Montague, and Exeter, and Nicholas Carew suffered this estrangement from self; and Norris and George Boleyn before them. Montague had said, 'The king never made a man but he destroyed him again'. Why should Cromwell be an exception?"* [23, p. 631]. At the same time, there are practically no examples of a successful ending for those in power. Their progressive aspirations end in bloodshed, death, dissolution of personality.

The examined texts are characterized by a deep distrust and scepticism towards authorities and bureaucratic institutions. Power is presented as a corrupt force that leaves an inevitable imprint on those who are not strong enough to resist its temptations. With the disappearance of the absolute monarchy, its role is taken over by the state bureaucracy, that is, the nature of power in any era remains the same. At the same time, the existing situation of forced subordination on various social levels is interpreted as an inevitable and necessary evil. Utopian projects of social order do not occur (the rare exceptions are B. Unsworth's cycle *"Sacred Hunger"* and *"The Tolstoy Estate"* by S. Conte).

The destinies of rulers are a way to explore the driving forces of history, the problem of the degree of personal responsibility in a historical perspective, and also, in the case of H. Mantel, to juxtapose the great figures of the past to the weak and bland politicians of today (which she has repeatedly stressed in her interviews) [24]. Weakness is unforgivable in a leader and has a most disastrous impact on the community. This axiom is vividly proved in the novel *"The Western Wind"* by S. Harvey, where the priest documents the disintegration of social, political, psychological order brought about by the corruption of leadership: *"if the village starves it looks to me, and I look to him, and he looks to the archdeacon who looks to the bishop and finds nobody there. And people lose faith because their protectors have not protected them, and the Lord loses faith in the protectors, whom he appointed to keep him in the hearts of all. Once the Lord has lost his faith in you, you're upriver with no raft and one leg"* [25, p. 42].

The cynical manipulative nature of administrative institutions is emphasized. A. Arkush and A. Fedorenko mockingly turn soviet hospitals into torture chambers that transform people into weresheep (*"Revision", "Heritage"*). P. O'Brian's Admiralty encourages drunkenness in exchange for obedience: *"If they was only to get half a pint of three-water grog we should soon have a bloody mutiny on our hands. And quite right, too"* [26, p. 93].

Thus, despite the objective discrepancies in the choice of historic material, differences in culture and mentality, Belarusian and British authors at the present stage demonstrate very similar ways of representing various options of power relations and leadership, the factors that determine the historical success or tragedy of the nation.

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